

Cultural Imperialism Sucks: a visit to Berlin

After I exited the plane, it took me several minutes before I realized I was in Germany. After all, the airport was designed with the same basic concepts, the people all looked fairly normal, and all the advertisements were all identical to their counterparts in the US.

Once we left the airport and begun wandering around Berlin, things didn't get much better. There was a Dunkin' Donuts and a Burger King, a Pizza Hut and a T-Mobile store (called T-Punkt in some weird homage to Ashton Kutcher), ads for Coca-Cola and even a The Body Shop. (A major shopping mall was run by Sony; just like in old SF.) The streets looked roughly similar, the cars had the same manufacturers, the buildings had the same basic styles.

The similarity plays tricks on you. It not only took me a while to realize I was in Germany, it was a while before I realized this was the former home of the Nazis. (I was trying to think where I'd heard of the Reichstag before...) When I exclaimed my discovery, apparently the older people on the bus turned to look at me. One wonders how much of their fitting in is an attempt to forget their different past.

There were still differences, of course. In America, if someone knocked you out and took you on a plane to some random city in the country, you probably wouldn't notice except for the fact that the street signs might have changed color. Aside from that tiny bit of individuality, cities in America are almost literally indistinguishable, down to the streets and landscaping. Germany isn't that bad.

The most obvious is that they get to keep speaking their quirky little language, although only speaking English here gets you pretty far. On the other hand, their currency—and presumably their government—has been integrated into the EU. But the biggest thing you notice is that the city is simply more elegant. The cars are smaller, the public transit far superior, and the font on the street signs to die for. But if london had EU currency, I'm not sure it'd be all that distinguishable.

There is a blatant taste for modernist architecture. (This is the land of the Bauhaus, I suppose.) Just about every building I've been to has been done up in styles that would be considered high culture in America. Including our hotel room, where you can see into the top half of the shower from the bed and a door swings between the shower and the toilet, so that you can only use one with any privacy at once.

Despite the usual guidebook platitudes, Berlin does not feel like a particularly vibrant city. Abandoned construction sites are everywhere, with large quantities of supplies just laying by the street, and graffiti coats most public surfaces, not enough to demand a repainting, but enough to make it everpresent. All the stores have signs announcing that new, shorter hours will begin starting next year. I overhear complaints about 18% unemployment.

With an overseas like this, one wonders why Americans make such a fuss about going overseas. One can apparently visit Europe with about as much culture shock as visiting LA: a few different local chains, a different public transit system, a new accent to learn, and, of course, a new set of street signs. A convenience for the business traveler, perhaps. A vast emptiness for everyone else.

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